

Adapting the Process Writing Approach to English Language Learners with Special  
Needs: Using Visuals

by

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## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

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*To my beloved grandmother, Maria José Calazans “Vovans”.*

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## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

## Abstract

The available literature on the writing characteristics and best practices to teach writing to English Language Learners who also present some disability is scarce. In order to understand and provide some insight on the developments in this field, I propose an adaptation of the Process Writing Approach based on a literature review of the existing bibliography about the writing characteristics of English Language Learners, Special Needs Learners, and English Language Learners with Special Needs' writing, the effects of the Process Writing Approach in teaching writing to these groups, and the use of visuals in writing instruction. The main assumptions of this study are: a) The Process Writing Approach provides an opportunity to differentiate instruction to ELLs with special needs and gives them additional opportunities to bring their funds of knowledge to the classroom, improving their writing, and b) By allowing students to rely on visuals in different phases of the writing process teachers will be addressing the needs of both visual and verbal learners, therefore allowing students more options to develop writing skills. The main pedagogical implication is that by dividing writing in recursive stages and inserting visuals as scaffolding throughout the entire writing process, teachers will provide an alternative approach to writing instruction that may be more effective to English Language Learners with Special Needs.

*Keywords:* English Language Learners, Special Needs, English Language Learners with special needs, Process Writing, Visuals.

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

## Table of Contents

I – Introduction .....	7
II – Methodology .....	10
III - The writing of ELLs with special needs .....	12
3.1 – Why is writing a challenge? .....	12
3.2 – Writing characteristics .....	14
3.2.1 – Planning .....	15
3.2.2 – Generating and Organizing ideas .....	16
3.2.3 – Inert Knowledge .....	16
3.2.4 – Revision: focus on mechanics .....	17
3.2.5 – Editing .....	18
3.2.6 – Audience .....	19
3.2.7 – Attitudes towards writing .....	20
IV – The Process Writing Approach.....	23
4.1 – Definition of the Process Writing Approach.....	23
4.2 - Challenges of the Process Writing Approach .....	25
4.3 – Advantages of the Process Writing Approach .....	27
4.4 – Effectiveness of the Process Writing Approach.....	28
V – Visuals in writing .....	35
5.1 – Verbal vs visual learners: A teaching disability? .....	36
5.2 – Advantages of using visuals in writing .....	37
5.3 – Challenges of using visuals in writing .....	41
VI – Suggestions and Conclusion .....	44
6.1 – Suggestions.....	44
6.2 – Conclusion.....	49
VII – References .....	52
Appendix A: Survey .....	58
Appendix B: Interview guide.....	60

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

### I – Introduction

In an era when inclusion in education is a growing field, there is great emphasis on how to teach Special Needs Children. Policies are changing or being adapted to meet the needs of these students; reforms are being implemented to stimulate inclusive classrooms and research is constantly being developed to understand what these needs are and the best teaching approaches to these students. On the other hand, Second Language Acquisition is a well-explored field and research on teaching methods, political/cultural implications of second language (L2) learning and teaching is extensively discussed, but still with much to discover. In more recent years, there seems to be a need to joint these two fields of study in order to understand and improve practices for students who are both English Language Learners (ELLs) and special needs.

ELLs refer to non-native English speakers who are learning English in schools (Peregoy and Boyle, 2013) and it is a fast growing population in the United States of America (USA). Heward (2000) define disability as the reduced function or loss of a particular body part or organ that may prevent students' ability to perform certain tasks as to see, to read, to write, to walk. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) define disability as:

A child evaluated in accordance with Sec. 300.304 through 300.311 as having mental retardation, a hearing impairment (including deafness), a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment (including blindness), a serious emotional disturbance (referred to in this part as "emotional disturbance"), an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, and other health impairment, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

disabilities, and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services. (n/d, para. 1).

As the broad definition of special needs includes students who have a speech or language impairment, many times ELLs in early stages of English acquisition are referred to Special Education services due to similar characteristics shared by ELL and students with disabilities, aggravated by teachers' lack of training and knowledge of second language acquisition and a tendency to associate bilingualism with disability (Liasidou, 2013; Connor and Boskin, 2001; Huang, Clarke, Milczarski, and Raby, 2011; Heward, 2000; Baca, 1990). The inadequate referral of ELLs to Special Education has negative consequences to ELLs, namely a regression in their progress (Huang, Clarke, Milczarski, and Raby, 2011) and inadequate progress because the special education instruction fail to address their socio-cultural and linguistics needs (Liasidou, 2013).

Although the overrepresentation of ELLs in Special Education classrooms is a reality, there are, in fact, ELLs who also present some kind of disability. The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA) (2009) reported that in 2007 there were approximately 500,000 ELLs with disabilities served, and 10% of the ELLs population also presented some disability. For the school year 2005-06 states reported to the U.S. Department of Education that 4,985,120 students were classified as ELL, 6,089,529 students were served by IDEA, 490,949 ELL students served by IDEA (NCELA) (2009).

For Liasidou (2013), ELLs with special needs students “experience the accumulative and intersecting effects of social disadvantages on the basis of their ability and linguistic characteristics” (p. 11). In addition, teaching methods and strategies are understood and practiced as devoid of political and ideological content



## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

which may be inappropriate to culturally and linguistically diverse students (Delpit, 1988). In other words, language, culture, and disability define English language learners with special education needs, and all three aspects must be accommodated in instruction, especially when teaching writing which is a skill much governed and influenced by students personal interests, culture, and abilities.

In the absence of empirically-validated research on writing instruction strategies for ELLs with disabilities, I propose a literature review of the existing research on the characteristics of ELLs; Special Needs Learners, and ELLs with Special Needs writing in chapter 1, followed by a review on the research that investigates the effects of the Process Writing Approach in teaching writing to children with writing difficulties, ELLs, and students with learning disabilities in Chapter 2 and in chapter 3 I revise the use of visuals in writing instruction. Based on this review I will suggest an adaptation of the Process Writing Approach for the academic needs of students who are both ELLs and special needs students.

This study can be a guide to teachers, parents, educators, administrators, and policy makers in the sense that it will give a general overview of what already exists about the writing of ELLs, special needs, and ELLs with special needs students, the process writing approach, and the use of visuals in the writing process. It also aims to provide insight into an alternative approach to writing instruction specifically designed for ELLs with Special Needs that takes into consideration the students' knowledge and cultural background as well as their disability challenges. By allowing students to draw and use visuals in different phases of the writing process (not only in the drafting phase), teachers will be activating and using students' funds of knowledge and providing them constant access to resources where they can confirm content and structure.

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

### II – Methodology

The research design selected for this study is the Grounded Theory Design, which consists of “a systematic, qualitative procedure used to generate a theory that explains, at a broad conceptual level, a process, an action, or an interaction about a substantive topic” (Creswell, 2012, p. 423). Still according to this author, the Grounded Theory generates a theory when existing theories do not address the problem of the research. Since there is a gap in literature regarding the effectiveness of the use of visuals in the Process Writing Approach to writing instruction of ELLs with special needs’, this research will synthesize the results of previously conducted studies with regard to:

- a) Characteristics of ELLs, Special Needs students, and of ELLs Special Needs students’ writing;
- b) Effectiveness of the Process Writing Approach in improving ELLs, Special Needs students, and ELLs Special Needs students’ writing;
- c) How using visuals in writing can be beneficial to students who face challenges when writing;

Based on literature review, this study proposes an adaptation of the Process Approach by including visuals in the writing instruction claiming that it may be useful to ELLs with special needs. The limitations of this study will not allow testing these adaptations, but fosters the possibility to make suggestions as to how other educators can apply these ideas their writing classrooms.

In order to conduct this study only peer-reviewed articles or books were selected. For the completion of the first chapter, articles/books discussing either the writing of ELLs, Special Needs and/or ELLs with Special Needs were examined. Regarding the

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

second chapter, research studying the effectiveness of the Process approach to writing instruction without explicit reference of being performed with the target population of this study was considered when the subjects of the studies were specifically referred to as poor writers or shared writing characteristics with either ELLs, Special Needs and/or ELLs with Special Needs due to lack of scientific research on this area directed to the effectiveness of this approach to the specific population of the present work. The same principle was applied to select the literature for the third chapter (Using visuals in writing).

This research was guided by three main questions:

- a) What are the difficulties that ELLs with special needs may find in writing?
- b) Will the breaking down of the writing process suggested by the Process Writing Approach provide an opportunity to differentiate instruction to ELLs with special needs and give them additional opportunities to improving their writing skills?
- c) Can visuals can be incorporate throughout the different stages of the process writing approach as an asset to facilitate and improve the development of writing skills of ELLs with special needs?

This study hypothesizes that:

- a) The Process Writing Approach provides an opportunity to differentiate instruction to ELLs with special needs and gives them additional opportunities to bring their funds of knowledge to the classroom, improving their writing, and
- b) By allowing students to rely on visuals in different phases of the writing process teachers will be addressing the needs of both visual and verbal learners, therefore allowing students more options to develop writing skills.

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

### III - The writing of ELLs with special needs

The number of students in the United States of America (USA) with a writing disability is not known (Graham and Harris, 2005), however, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2011) shows that the majority of students in the United States do not perform well in writing. The data reveals that 20% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders performed below the basic level, 54% on the basic level, 24% on the proficient level, and 3% on the advanced level; while for 12<sup>th</sup> graders, 21% performed below the basic level, 52% on the basic level, 24% on the proficient level, and 3% on the advanced level.

#### **3.1 – Why is writing a challenge?**

Researchers agree that writing is one of the greatest challenges for students in general, but an even greater issue for ELLs (Englert, 1995; Graham and Harris, 2003; Maarof and Murat, 2013; Bayat, 2014), to children with special needs (Graham and Harris, 2005), and to bilinguals with special needs (Reis, 1993) due to its cognitive complexity that comprises a number of processes. According to De La Paz (2007), we do not know the number of ELLs with special needs with specific writing disabilities, however, “when considered as a group, children with special needs typically struggle when learning to write” (p. 308). Englert (1995) points out that many students with learning difficulties, including students with learning problems who also are bilingual or have limited-English proficiency, may have adjustment issues both in school and as adults because “the cognitive demands associated with second-language processing complicates the already complex demand of written expression” ( p. 304).

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

Cihak and Castle (2011, citing Graham and Harris, 1989) show that three factors contribute to problems for students who struggle with writing: a) a text production that hinders the generation of ideas; b) the fact that students do not know the writing process; and c) the fact that students are unaware of strategies to apply and assist in written expression. Englert (1995) also points to the absence of explicit instruction, the small amount of time allocated to written expression during school day, teachers' lack of preparedness, and "an over emphasis on the mechanics of writing at the expense of developing the underlying cognitive operations" (p. 304) as factors that may influence students' writing performance.

As found by Graham and Harris (2003), students with disabilities employ little effort in the writing process and the result is a composition that "is generally a list of topic-related ideas rather than a coherent discussion or examination of the topic" (p. 324). This result is due to the fact that this group of students tends to minimize their use of the writing processes and they have difficulties sustaining the writing effort (De La Paz, 2007). Whatever factors influencing the writing issues ELLs with special needs face, researchers seem to agree that this group of students share common characteristics of ELLs and children with learning disability's writing and the aspects of the writing process they struggle with, because typically, they know less about the recursive nature of writing and its processes than their regular peers (Graham and Harris, 2003, De La Paz, 2007).

For Herrera, Cabral and Murry (2012), "Although most teachers recognized that CLD [Culturally and Linguistically Diverse] students may have difficulty with skills such as vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar, many have never considered the numerous other characteristics associated with students with learning disabilities that are also typical of students acquiring a second language or experiencing

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

acculturation” (p. 233). This aspect may be one of the more relevant issues to acknowledge as ELLs who also present learning disabilities may need more or different approaches from students who have a disability but are not ELLs, that is, they need strategies, methods and approaches that address both their cultural and linguistic needs and their disability. Students will not develop language skills if pedagogical strategies focus only on their disability (Liasidou, 2013).

### 3.2 – Writing characteristics

On discussing the typical characteristics of both ELLs with learning disabilities and ELLs without learning disabilities, Herrera, Cabral, and Murray (2012) point the following:

- a) Literacy: difficulty with sound-symbol association, sounds out words but unable to blend, poor orientation to page and text, below grade-level reading, struggles in content areas, unusual spelling errors, letter reversals, difficulty with grammar structures, trouble remembering (words and texts read, syllable sequences, letters and numbers seen).
- b) Language: appears delayed compared to peers, articulation and grammar errors, limited vocabulary, difficulty following directions, forgets easily (what was just said/heard, read; previously learned information), poor phonemic awareness skills (unable to rhyme; struggles with auditory sound blending), misunderstands pragmatics (body language), narratives lack details and sequence, comprehension problems (p. 234).
- c)

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

### 3.2.1 – Planning

One of the main sub processes ELLs with special needs seem to struggle with is planning (Englert, 1995; Graham and Harris, 2003; De La Paz, 2007; Dunn and Finley, 2010). Maarof and Murat (2013), state that weak students often do not plan their writing and while good ESL writers carefully plan by weighing their decisions on what and how to write, weak ESL writers spend a little more time on planning; however, they fail to generate ideas and their plans are generally ineffective. Citing a study by Hu and Chen (2007), Maarof and Murat (2013) show that in a study with four writers from different backgrounds, the best ESL writers planned their ideas by using outlines and visuals, contrasting with the other two weak students who spent more time mentally planning and the results were ineffective development of their ideas in writing.

According to Englert (1995), poor writers spend little effort improving their writing plans or gathering additional information and spend less time planning activities as note-taking, idea generation and activating their background knowledge. Graham and Harris (2003) also state that students with learning disabilities rely more on the generation of ideas rather than on planning before starting to write. In an experience with fifth grade students with learning disabilities Graham and Harris (2003) showed that this group took less than one minute of advanced planning and immediately started working on the composition which prevents the production of a well-articulated text.

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

### **3.2.2 – Generating and Organizing ideas**

Research has shown that students with learning disabilities have difficulty not only generating, but also organizing their ideas, and this causes students to end up producing poor texts that do not correspond to their real funds of knowledge (Englert, 1995; Graham and Harris, 2003; De La Paz, 2007). Graham and Harris (2003) affirm that compared to their general education peers, children with disabilities know less about organization and categorizing writing ideas as well as evaluating and revising texts. For these authors, a good strategy to overcome this issue would be to help students organizing their information or ideas according to categories; however, many students with learning problems face difficulties organizing, labelling, and categorizing the details (Englert, 1995). This problem may be due to the fact that these students face challenges when trying to access their background information and they have difficulties with the mechanics of writing, which interferes with the process of generating content.

### **3.2.3 – Inert Knowledge**

Colley (1993, citing Lund and Duchan, 1983) calls our attention to the fact that “understanding written language, therefore, will not only come from the info in the sentences, but will also be supplemented and organized from the background knowledge supplied by the writer” (p. 154). In fact, Orelus and Hills (2010) performed a case study with a Spanish English learner identified as special needs, and they found out that his productions were constantly informed and influenced by his cultural context. However, in spite the role of role of their background in their



## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

writing, research has shown that ELLs with special needs have difficulties accessing their background knowledge even when they are familiar with the topic (Graham and Harris, 2003). Englert (1995) postulates that this group of students has difficulties “activating relevant ideas, engaging in sustained thinking or searching their memories to produce more informative texts” (p. 306); this difficulty in accessing the background knowledge has been addressed in the literature as inert knowledge. That is, the inability to activate background knowledge in relevant situations or, as Colley puts it, difficulties in cognitive processes that allow a student to transfer, reduce, elaborate, store, recover, and use cognitive input. This problem may lead to others such as difficulties in producing multiple statements about familiar topics, generating and sustaining an idea or prematurely terminating a thought or telling everything they know about a topic in whatever order comes to mind before exhausting funds of relevant ideas (Englert, 1995). This results in a manifestation of severe discrepancy between what they know and what they actually put in their writing (Carrasquillo and Bonilla, 1990; Colley, 1993; Graham and Harris, 2003; De La Paz, 2007), even with a familiar genre as story telling (Graham and Harris, 2003).

### **3.2.4 – Revision: focus on mechanics**

Graham and Harris (2003) claim that students with disabilities tend to focus more on mechanical errors rather than content or text structure. Surprisingly, mechanical errors are one of the major areas of difficulties for disabled students (Vaughn and Bos, 2012; Andrzejczak, Trainin, and Poldberg, 2005). Lee, Bopry and Hedberg (2007) argue that poor writers think that their lack of writing competence derives from their limited language skills/resources; as a result, they focus their

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

attention on language issues. Graham and Harris (2003) reported that in a study with fifth and sixth graders with learning disabilities, students misspelled one-eighth of the words in their papers and one-third of their sentences lacked initial capitalization or final punctuation. These researchers report a study where students with learning disabilities were asked how they would revise a paper to make it better, and 61% of the responses focused on mechanics of the text such as “make it neater” or “spell the words correctly”. The reason may be the fact that these students see revising as proof-reading and because their writing “contains an inordinate number of mechanical errors” (p. 326). A possible explanation is that exceptional children may exhibit a disorder that affect the cognitive skills needed for processing, understanding, and monitoring written communication (Colley, 1993), which is a quality they would need in order to turn off their attention to mechanical errors and focus also on structure and content (Graham and Harris, 2003). Furthermore, “many students with LD [Learning Disabilities] do not automatically detect error in texts, although they can be prompt to identify such errors if teachers tell them that the errors are presented (Colley, 1993). This idea is corroborated by Reis (1993) who claim that although students with special education needs are willing to change their errors if they are pointed to them, they do not identify errors spontaneously, which in turn causes difficulties when editing.

### **3.2.5 – Editing**

According to Englert (1995), many students with writing difficulties approach the editing task as passive readers. They do not question the meaning of text and may

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

not employ appropriate correction strategies in response to communication breakdowns (Colley, 1993).

Engert (1995) says that “editors must themselves possess adequate comprehension skills in order to detect violations to the meaning of texts and to employ fix-up strategies when comprehension breakdowns are identified [and] while better writers attend to text structures and text-level problems, novices approach revisions at sentence-level or mechanical tasks (e.g. spelling and grammatical conventions) without really changing the meaning of texts” (p. 311); therefore, the self-regulation skills necessary to writing goals, and purposes are inadequately developed in students with special needs. Vaughn and Bos (2012) show that when a group of students were asked about what made good writing, the students answered ‘spelling words correctly’, ‘writing correct sentences’, and having ‘good handwriting’; none has pointed content, writing with a purpose or considering the needs of an audience as an aspect to consider in good writing. For Colley (1993), peer, classmates or partners reading each other’s papers can be helpful in developing editing skills.

### **3.2.6 – Audience**

As students with disabilities have difficulties distancing themselves from their texts for revision, they also have problems in making the shift on perspective to imagine their readers (Englert, 1995, Graham and Harris, 2003, De La Paz, 2007). An aspect that may account for this feature is the possibility that if students perceive that their sole audience is the teacher, they may assume that their audience already knows the topic, understands the purpose of the paper and therefore they may be less precise

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

in specifying the purpose and communicating information about the topic (Engert, 1995). According to Graham and Harris (2003), in a study performed with learning disabled children, Graham (1997) concluded that this group of students is often indifferent to reader-based concerns; when asked to evaluate their writing, only 6% of the participants focused on a possible reaction of an audience to their text. Moreover, these students “essentially write in isolation, dumping their knowledge on the page without seeming to ask themselves questions such as “have I told my readers all that I know? Does this paper make sense?” Engert (1995, p. 310). Process writing approach may be helpful in that the peer response stage can stimulate students to work in groups which helps to provide students with a mental model of readers in order to clarify any incongruity between their ideas and the audience perception of their thoughts (Lee, Bopry, and Hedberg, 2006).

### **3.2.7 – Attitudes towards writing**

Research on the characteristics of this group of students’ writing is useful in order to develop proper strategies and approaches to make writing significant to students; however, this data must be complemented by studies on these students’ attitudes towards writing, as motivation is an important factor in promoting second language acquisition (Ortega, 2009). Graham and Harris (2003) show that in a study where students were asked to evaluate their attitudes towards writing they generally used positive evaluations; however, this result was contrasting with clinical reports where these same students frequently indicated that they would avoid writing if they could. This idea is also corroborated by Straub and Alias (2013) who consider that students with learning disabilities are usually more negative towards writing than peers without disabilities.

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

Together with attitudes towards writing, it is important to study the students' self-evaluation of performance. Students with disabilities are overconfident regarding their performance in writing, and they favorably rated their ability to write reports, stories and book reports as positive (Graham and Harris, 2003). In addition, they positively rated their abilities to get and organize ideas for their writing, transcribing their ideas into sentences, sustaining their writing effort and correcting mistakes. Furthermore, they perceive that they write as well as their peers without disabilities (Straub and Alias, 2013). Although this may seem positive because a good judgment on one's ability may promote persistence, it is necessary to look at the down side: "children who overestimate their capabilities may fail to allocate needed resources and effort believing that this is unnecessary" (Graham and Harris, 2003, p. 327). For Heward (2000), "Compounding the weak language base that many students with learning disabilities bring to the writing task is an approach to the writing process that involves minimal planning, effort and metacognitive control" (p. 253).

Graham and Harris (2003) postulate that students' with disabilities' knowledge about genres, devices and conventions, and knowledge about how to write is very limited; similarly, ELLs find in writing a very challenging task in language acquisition because they must overcome language barriers like rules and usage and also, written communication features as rhetoric and effectiveness (Freeman and Freeman, 2011; Peregoy and Boyle, 2013). Teachers must be very conscious and attentive to these issues when developing teaching strategies, practices and approaches that can foster the development of language, content, and technical features of the writing process.

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

Educators must adopt and adapt approaches that can address both the students' language and disability needs and, at the same time, regard writing "not just as a matter of process taking place inside an author's head, but also a collaborative act influenced by complex and interrelated social factors" (Unger and Fleischman, 2004, p. 90).

An approach teachers can adapt to writing instruction of ELLs with Special Needs is the Process Writing Approach as its different stages allow the possibility to address the idea generation, organization, language and text related issues of these students in pre-writing, writing, editing, and revision stages. In addition, it can foster collaboration and social factors on the peer review stage and foster an audience based writing on the publishing stage.

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

### IV – The Process Writing Approach

Traditionally, the teaching of writing has been performed using a product-oriented approach (Li, 2007) where writing is seen as mainly “concerned with knowledge about the structure of language, and writing development as the result of the imitation of input, in the form of texts provided by the teachers” (Badger & White, 2000, p. 154). Moreover, this approach places emphasis on reproduction rather than originality (Li, 2007).

Treating writing as product-oriented implies that writing is primarily about linguistic knowledge, with attention focused on the appropriate use of vocabulary, syntax and cohesive devices (Badger & White, 2000). However, since the writing of both ELLs and special need students is constantly informed by their cultural background and characterized by a difficulty in organization, planning, errors recognition, sentence structure, and potential lack of vocabulary (De La Paz, 2007; Dunn & Finley, 2010), it becomes necessary to find alternatives to writing instruction for this group of students.

#### **4.1 – Definition of the Process Writing Approach**

The Process Writing Approach (PWA) emerged as an alternative that interprets “the act of writing [as] a series of distinctive thinking processes” (Bayat, 2014, p. 1134). According to Pritchard and Honeycutt (2006), the professional literature mentioned the writing process for the first time in 1947 when Day (1947) discussed the seven steps of the writing process. Since then, the process approach to writing has faced many challenges and issues regarding its definition and procedures

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

(Graham and Harris, 2005; Pritchard and Honeycutt, 2006). In this paper we regard Process Writing as an approach that treats writing as an act of distinctive interconnected non-linear thinking processes that facilitates the elaboration of a final product. As Seow (2002) states, “the idea behind it is not really to dissociate writing entirely from the written product and to merely lead students through the various stages of the writing process but to construct process-oriented writing instruction that will affect performance” (p. 316). That is, Process Writing as a method of thinking that “facilitates students’ analyses and organization of ideas, develops cooperation among students, provides the opportunity to manage and control writing, and allows for varied activities” (Bayat, 2014, p. 1134).

Perego and Boyle (2013) describe five phases in the PWA:

- a) Prewriting: generating and gathering ideas for writing; preparing for writing; identifying purpose and audience for writing; identifying main ideas and supporting details;
- b) Drafting: getting ideas down on paper quickly; getting a first draft that can be evaluated according to purpose and audience;
- c) Revising: reordering arguments or reviewing scenes in a narrative; reordering supporting information; reviewing or changing sentences;
- d) Editing: correcting spelling, grammar, punctuation, mechanics, etc.
- e) Publishing: sharing writing with one another, with students, or with parents; showing that writing is valued; creating a classroom library; motivating writing. (p. 259)

Pritchard and Honeycutt (2006) reveal that in the formative years, the process approach to writing was applied mainly to stories in a linear and prescriptive way,



## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

which results in many authors advocating against it; but today this approach is still facing some challenges.

### **4.2 - Challenges of the Process Writing Approach**

Pritchard and Honeycutt (2006) state that one of the main critics to this approach at the beginning was the merging of proofreading and editing as the same thing and the fact that it did not involve direct instruction. These authors cite Elbow (1973) who claimed that this idea of a linear, two-step writing and editing was counterproductive as writers do not have a clear picture of the final version before they start to write.

Flower and Haynes (1981) also present some resistance toward what they call the “Stage Models of Writing” as the Process Writing Approach that divides writing into stages or phases. For them, although the pre-writing stage helped improve the teaching of composition by calling attention to planning and discovery, the problem with such approaches is that they “model the growth of the written product, not the inner process of the person producing it” (p. 367). Furthermore, they claim that the stage models are organized in a linear sequence and reflect the growth of the written product, which do not represent the different processes and sub-processes that are part of writing. Bayat (2014) added to this list of disadvantages the fact that the PWA does not account for the mental processes used by the writer during text production, and that it ignores grammar structure and the written product which may cause inconveniences. Pritchard & Honeycutt (2006) also support this position as they claim that when people write they do not follow a fixed order.

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

Delpit (1988) suggests that the Process approach fails by not posing emphasizes on the product. For her, this has serious consequences to students of color as they are forced to follow a lot of rules about which they have not been told about. The researcher adds that since the final product is based on cultural codes, it is more readily produced when students receive explicit directions on how to produce it and are allowed to use their own voices.

Graham & Sandmell (2011) on their meta-analysis of Process Writing point out other disadvantages:

- a) The instruction provided in a process writing classroom is not powerful enough to ensure that students, especially students experiencing difficulty with writing, acquire needed writing skills and processes.
- b) Not enough attention is devoted to mastering foundational skills, such as handwriting, spelling, and sentence construction;
- c) Very little time is devoted to explicitly teaching students strategies for carrying out basic writing processes such as planning and revising. (p. 397).

This criticism to the Process Writing Approach seems relevant because focusing only on the process does not give students the sense of an audience. Furthermore, we have to consider that the reader does not have access to the process through which the final product was created; therefore, dismissing the product is not in accordance with a teacher's objective which is primarily to equip students with the tools to help them achieve and succeed in contexts other than the classroom. Despite the criticism, there are authors who support this approach.

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

### 4.3 – Advantages of the Process Writing Approach

By breaking down writing into phases, students have opportunities to focus on one aspect of the writing process at a time, which may increase their ability to produce a better work. The Process Writing Approach is also helpful because students are allowed to talk about their own experiences, to access their background, and to share and discuss their writing with peers; thus, promoting oral interaction (prewriting, drafting), self-expression, awareness of English grammar, better punctuation and spelling (revising, editing), and cooperative assistance among students through revisions. Publishing fosters the development of a sense of audience, involves students in collaborative work and promotes motivation and enthusiasm since others will read their work. As Peregoy and Boyle (2013) state, Process Writing not “only promote[s] better writing, but also provide[s] numerous opportunities for oral discussion within which a great deal of “comprehensible input” is generated, promoting overall language development” (p. 263). Furthermore, by introducing students to the writing process [teachers] can show them that they will need to concentrate on various aspects of writing at different times in the process” (Idem, p. 263). The division of the writing act into parts or phases for writing instruction allows students to focus on each stage, one at a time, and improves communication with the reader through language (Bayat, 2014) by allowing students to go through the different phases according to their necessity.

Another advantage to Process Writing Approach is that by promoting nonlinear phases and the possibility to focus on one phase at a time, students will be taught how to brainstorm and generate ideas, and will gain more skills in planning, which are the areas where ELLs and students with learning disabilities present more

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

difficulties (Baker, Gersten, and Graham, 2003; Graham and Harris, 2005). Moreover, by focusing on one aspect at a time, students can concentrate on “conveying the intended meaning rather than continuously searching for ideas to continue writing” (Maarof & Murat, 2013, p. 54). Despite the advantages mentioned above, studies on the effectiveness of using the Process Writing Approach with students in general seem to be inconclusive.

### 4.4 – Effectiveness of the Process Writing Approach

Pritchard and Honeycutt (2006) indicate that a study performed in 1992 with 29,500 students’ self-reports for the NAEP assessment, concluded that the implementation of the process approach in an almost everyday basis results in highest average writing scores, however, the NAEP report does not give a clear evidence about what kind of instruction is considered process writing.

Graham and Sandmel (2011) on their meta-analysis of the effects of the Process Writing Approach in the quality of students writing and motivation to write indicate that several researches showed that PWA had a positive and statistically significant impact on writing quality for students in grades 4-12, but not for students in grades 7-12. Regarding weaker writers, Graham and Sandmel’s (2011) meta-analysis does not sustain the claim made by other researchers (e.g. Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006) that PWA is an effective method for improving writing quality. They also concluded that:

Although this approach is effective in improving the writing of typical students, it is not particularly powerful relative to other writing treatments and its impact on those who are more vulnerable educationally, ELLS and children with disabilities are unproven outside of a few case studies. (p. 405)

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

However, Pritchard and Honeycutt (2006), citing a study performed by Croes (1990) with 157 learning disabled students in grades 1-5 concluded that the process approach improved their overall writing performance.

According to Pritchard and Honeycutt (2006), from the late 1980's through 2003 there has been an increase on research specifically designed to measure the "quality of students' written product as a result of using the writing process" (p. 279). However, in their meta-analysis of the effectiveness of the process writing approach, they found that there were several methodological issues such as the fact that most of the articles and reports about the topic were not research reports and that many raised questions that are not empirically answerable. Even those reports that posed empirical answers did not employ an empirical methodology to answer the question and there was a difficulty to define Process Writing and its procedures. In their literature review, the authors selected only research reports from professional literature that describes empirical information about a specific question related to the approach and that has clear description of the process.

Pritchard and Honeycutt (2006) show that during the 1970's and 1980's research focused on establishing a relationship between the components of the writing process to specific variables such as writing apprehension, journal writing, thought and emotions, verbal issues, etc., instead of the effectiveness of the process. Most of the studies did not include final improved product analysis (Pritchard and Honeycutt, 2006).

Unger and Fleischman (2004) state that a study performed in 1998 by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has reported that "process writing instructional practices were associated with higher test scores" (p.91).

According to these researchers, two-thirds of 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders using the process

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

approach had higher average scores than those who did not due to intensive planning, multiple drafts, formal planning outlines, a defined purpose and audience, and the use of resources other than the textbook before starting to write. However, the authors recommend caution in the interpretation of NAEP results since it is not clear whether the results are due to the use of the Process Writing Approach alone or due to other alternative approaches concomitantly used in writing instruction.

On concluding their analysis of the literature on the effectiveness of the process writing approach Pritchard and Honeycutt (2006) citing Crammes (2001) say that despite the process approach's weaknesses it is still a better alternative to the traditional approach to teaching writing, however, it is important to rethink and adjust theories, procedures, and practices.

Graham and Sandmel (2011) also performed a meta-analysis of the Process Writing Approach. The authors make a thorough analysis of the history of process writing and its advantages and disadvantages, but they also investigate if it improves the quality of students writing and writing motivation in grades 1-12. In their methodology they used only studies related to the effectiveness of process writing that employed experimental or quasi-experimental designs, collected data at pretest and posttest, measured writing quality, motivation or both, and that contained sufficient information to calculate Effect Size. They investigated twenty-nine studies, 24 of them performed in general education classrooms, five studies with students with learning disabilities (four), and one with ELLs as subjects.

The results show that the 24 studies performed in regular classrooms revealed an improvement in students' writing. However, regarding the 5 studies with students with disabilities and ELLs. They claim that their meta-analysis do not support the same conclusions of previous studies that affirm process writing as an effective

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

approach to teach writing to weaker writers. They recommend that their research must be expanded regarding age and the combination of process writing and traditional skills instruction rather than the Process approach alone. According to them,

Although the process writing approach is effective in improving the writing of typical students, it is not a particularly powerful approach relative to other writing treatments, and its impact with those that are most vulnerable educationally, ELLs and children with learning disabilities are unproven outside of a few case studies (p. 405).

Bayat (2014) investigated the effect of this approach on writing success and anxiety. Using a pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design with 74 first-year students studying core-school teaching for 10 weeks in the Fall term of 2012, the writing apprehension test, and students' writing as instruments, the study found that process writing approach affected writing success in a positive and statistically significant way. The likelihood of unsuccessful text production at the end of the writing process decreased considerably and the approach improved participants' success in written expression and decreased writing anxiety. The author recommends process writing, but adverts that further research is needed in order to understand the distinction between anxiety resulting from student's personality traits and anxiety associated with writing skills. The article claims that the product approach and only negative errors feedback are among the reasons why writing is one of the most difficult tasks for students. As such, the researcher hypothesizes that the Process Writing Approach may be an option to give priority to content, and generation of ideas, hence improving students' writing skills. Although this study addresses features that constitute fields of struggle to ELLs with special needs (e.g. generating ideas), its results must be carefully considered as the study did not include this population, but rather with first year students studying pre-school teaching.

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

In order to overcome the disadvantages and the lack of concrete results regarding its effectiveness, most researchers recommend the use of process writing with other writing approaches and strategies (Badger and White, 2000; Pritchard and Honeycutt, 2006; Graham and Sandmel, 2011; Bayat, 2014) because as Graham and Sandmel (2011) suggest, the effectiveness of the Process Writing Approach depends on who is assessed, when, and on which outcome. The process approach to writing is not without its criticism however, it can be beneficial to students in general, ELLs and Special needs if it can be adapted to the specific needs of the students. For Tomlison (2001), by applying the Process Writing Approach to ELLs and Special needs students, teachers will be differentiating instruction and acknowledging the social and historical nature of learning/teaching. This strategy will help students make sense and process the content and skills, and it will not confound their ideas. As (Peregoy and Boyle, 2013, p. 174) demonstrate, in an ELL, special needs or ELLs with special needs context, it is important to acknowledge that:

Written language use takes place in a social context and serves personal and social purposes, thus learning is achieved through interpersonal relationships in the varying social contexts in which literacy instruction takes place; [therefore] literacy development evolves through social interactions involving written language from which children develop ideas about the forms and functions of print. (p. 174)

The idea expressed above is concomitant with Vigotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Language which sustains the premise that learning is a social and historical event in which language plays an important role (Vaughn & Bos, 2012). Vigotsky's concept of scaffolding instruction also supports Process Writing Approach as it emphasizes the implicit nature of encouraging and supporting learners as they develop new skills (Vaughn & Bos, 2012). Finally, Vygotsky "argued that learning takes place when an adult or more capable peer asks questions, points out aspects of a problem, or



## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

make suggestions, working in a learner's zone of proximal development" (Freeman & Freeman, 2001, p. 83), which can be practiced in Process Writing Approach as students receive feedback from teachers and peers during revising and editing phases.

According to Li (2007), since Baca and Cervantes' study in 1991, researchers have shown that people raised in diverse cultures may have diverse thinking processes and are more sensitive to content, more tolerant to errors and make little use of categories and formal logic; therefore, when teaching to students from diverse backgrounds, it seems that a more flexible, recursive, non-prescriptive and non-linear approach to writing instruction could be more adequate since there would be space to respect and value cultural thinking differences.

Danoff, Harris, and Graham (1993) call our attention to the fact that the process approach to writing instruction usually emphasize the cognitive processes and strategies central to effective writing; however, many teachers do not focus primarily on cognitive processes and strategies when teaching writing to students with special needs. What happens is that teachers "tend to facilitate children's 'natural' development over long periods of time through questions and 'gentle' response during conferences, sharing, and so forth" (p. 297).

Taking into consideration that writing is socially, culturally, and historically constructed; teachers must be aware that just as students' cultural orientations are evident in their academic performance, so are principles of good teaching (Garcia & Tyler, 2010). Similarly, the implementation of the process writing approach should take into consideration that people differ not only in their cognitive abilities or capacities to learn (cognitive or learning styles), but also "on the ways they prefer to put cognitive abilities to use" (Ortega 2009, p. 205). Therefore, cultural/disability

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

responsive teachers should advocate for an approach to writing that adapts to the students learning styles and needs. In other words, teachers should advocate for:

“the notion of a pedagogy of cultural alternatives, an educational project that seeks to create autonomous learners by providing them alternative ways of thinking and being in the world; a project that seeks to open up spaces for those learners to deal differently with the world, to be authors of their world” (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 142, citing Pennycook).

Among these strategies, teachers can include the use of visuals in the different stages of the writing process since they have been proved to be useful to both ELLs and students with learning disabilities in writing instruction.

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

## V – Visuals in writing

Peregoy and Boyle (2013) narrate the story of a student who during a writing class was assigned a free writing activity. As everybody is working, this student is drawing. The teacher asks him what his story is about. He says he does not know yet. The teacher does not say anything and keeps walking around the room. Moments later, the teacher is surprised to see that he is still drawing and asks why he is not writing and, for the second time, what is his story; the student answers saying that he cannot know what his story is about before he could finish his drawing.

This story is illustrative that for some students visuals and writing are connected in several ways: both convey a message with a purpose and an audience, both show the author's deepest thoughts, experiences, and ideas. According to Lee, Bopry, and Hedberg (2006) citing Mayers' (1997), multimedia theory, the use of visuals (graphic organizers) may be useful, resourceful, and an important ally in assisting struggling writers because "students learn better from pictures and words rather than words alone" (p. 133).

Sinatra (1986) states that words are a representation of ideas about reality, while object language forms (visuals) are representations of that reality. When we write we need to add more and more words to clarify the meaning of our message, but sometimes, as happens to many of us, we cannot accurately describe or relate the exact event we want the audience to imagine due to several factors that may affect our ability to write. In this case, argues Sinatra (1986), the first thing that comes to our mind is "remember the picture of..." because some people can express better in visuals than in words.

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

### 5.1 – Verbal vs visual learners: A teaching disability?

According to Olson (1992), many children have problems with language not because they are learning disabled or reluctant writers, but because they are visual instead of verbal learners inserted in an educational system that privileges verbal learning. The problem is aggravated by the fact that teachers are and are expected to be verbal in their behavior and training, and they expect all students to be verbal. As a result, visual learners are seen as deficient when they are unable to understand someone's talk or to express themselves accordingly. For Olson (1992) visual learners see the world in great detail, however, they are unable to express what they see because they are forced to do it verbally, resulting in them being rarely rewarded because "their efforts fall short of what is expected" (p. 3). Olson (1992) shows that children who learn visually process information through images instead of through words and, since the current school perspective on learning serve best verbal students than visual students, visual learners have difficulties succeeding in school, do not progress academically, perform poorly in tests, and therefore are in danger.

For Sinatra (1986), instruction in traditional school is predominantly oral or written, not pictorial or visual. Understanding is thus dependent upon a retaining verbal memory which demands increments of time and the processing of several levels of memory unique to linguistically structured input before comprehension occurs, which is one of the typical areas of difficulty for ELLs with special needs. She claims that whether using conventional or innovative methods, visual learners are left out because teachers are using words to elicit more words.

As Olson (1992) points out, this focus on the verbal may be one of the reasons why visual learners are seen as deficient when they can't immediately understand the

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

meaning of others' talk or express themselves accordingly. It is not surprising, then, that they frequently become ever-more-reluctant writers, readers, and speakers. Citing Susanne Langer (1942), Olson (1992) has explained Einstein's understanding of himself as a visual learner: "the limits of language are not the last limits of experience, and things inaccessible to language may have their own forms of conception, that is to say, their own symbolic devices" (as cited in Olson, 1992, p. 5). This idea is corroborated by Connor and Boskin (2001) to whom a disorder may be interpreted as so if the students do not use the expected academic discourse.

### **5.2 – Advantages of using visuals in writing**

According to Olson (1992), writing and drawing inform each other and when students are educated using both verbal and visual modes of learning, they can move easily between these domains. Her statement is based on a number of factors that show that this inter-information process is possible:

- Children are both visual and verbal learners,
- Both pictures and words tell stories,
- Pictures can provide additional information to words for the visual learner,
- Words can provide additional informational to pictures for the verbal learner.

She suggests that it is important to incorporate visual devices and techniques into writing programs to enable visual learners to reach full verbal potential in order to compete in this highly verbal educational world. She presents some case studies where this method has proven to considerably improve students writing and language

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

skills in several different aspects such as adding more details, description, genre understanding, order of events, and text structure.

Olson (1992) interviewed students about the benefits of drawing to help improve their writing. The results show that for the students using drawing was helpful as they could look at it and say what they were thinking, it gave them ideas, it added more description to their stories, it provided better understanding of the story, assisted on remembering details, assisted on saying what was on their head.

According to the students, because sometimes if you cannot see something, we cannot say it so by using visuals they could really see what was happening in their story, and because you can see what you are thinking, it is easier to put the story on paper. As one of the students said, “When I was writing my first draft of my adventure, it was confusing because I could only picture it in my head. But when I started to draw, it was less confusing and much easier to write” (p. 71). Lee, Bopry, and Hedberg (2007) referring to Winn (1993), state that students’ knowledge of the content of the visual lets them anticipate what to look for and where to look for it, however, teachers must have teachers’ guidance because the type of selected representation depends on the task to be performed. Therefore, training is important to help students optimize the features of their visuals.

Bradley and Bradley (2006) assert that students can expand their knowledge by pooling what they know with others in a visual. They suggest the use of visuals even in groups as each individual can contribute and all the students can make connections. This strategy will be helpful in organizing students’ thoughts. It can be used during the peer response phase of the writing process.

Lee, Bopry, and Hedberg (2007) aimed to explore how knowledge of students’ cognitive processes when using multiple organizers can inform the teaching of

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

writing. According to these authors, graphic organizers are visual representations of ideas in keyword format and that, just like texts, have different functions and genre such as compare and contrast, problem and solution structures, etc. They also discuss how process writing can be helpful to poor writers students who normally focus their attention on language issues due to their limited language resources that can truncate the flow of their thoughts. The authors sustain that graphic organizers can help students:

- concentrate on meaning rather than form and other writing aspects using the process writing approach;
- Plan their writing in the pre-writing stage so that they will have a clear sense of direction when they write;
- Identify what information they should look for, what information is missing, and what information is redundant;
- Order their ideas so they can be clearly seen by looking at the hierarchy
- Record and review notes from texts, allowing students to access information or input twice;
- Reviewing their writing in the light of their goals;
- Manipulate their ideas.

For Lee, Bopry, and Hedberg (2006), since the process approach divides writing into stages and multiple drafts, it is possible for organizers to have a complementary function because they will foster generation of ideas, comments, and revision sequentially according to the purposes of each stage of the writing process.

Another advantage to the use of visuals in writing is that the visuals can work as a device memory devise (Lee, Bopry, and Hedberg, 2006) and therefore, be a useful aid in organizing students' thoughts (Bradley and Bradley, 2006). These ideas

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

seem to be corroborated by Dunn and Finley (2010) who state that “if students who struggle with writing could note their initial story ideas in a format other than words, they would have the metacognitive skills to know how to manage the process of describing a story, characters, setting, the main event, and drawing a cohesive conclusion” (p. 33). In other words, visuals could be used to activate inert knowledge, which is one of the features of ELLs with special needs writing.

According to Andrzejczak, Trainin, and Poldberg (2005), visual arts enhances the writing process as it guides students’ observation of the world. Students have more time to elaborate on their thoughts, create a distance to generate ideas, to create strong descriptions, develop concrete vocabulary, add details, and create more coherent texts. Vygotsky has hypothesized that make believe, drawing and writing can be viewed as different movement of a unified process of development of written language aided by images and leading to higher order thinking (Vygotsky, 1978).

Orelus and Hills (2010) performed a case study to investigate the characteristics of a bilingual special need student writing. The student’s first language is Spanish, but he received instruction in English. Although he could speak the two languages, he could neither read nor write in Spanish. According to the authors, most students who attended that school were “Latinos and African Americans of working class background” (Orelus and Hills, 2010, p. 138). One of the first findings of this study was that what the student “produced in his classroom were constantly informed and influenced by the cultural context of the school [and that] the language he used to produce and make meanings through texts has various functions: social, linguistic and cultural” (Orelus and Hills, 2010, p. 137). According to the authors, the student did well in a year due to well-established routines and procedures, but also because he was allowed to use creative ways to express his thoughts and ideas about himself and



## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

others. According to the researchers, the student's special education teacher stated that "many of her bilingual special education students expressed themselves best through drawing; and while some students had difficulty composing long and comprehensible essays, they did not struggle with drawing" (p. 142). Orelus and Hills (2010), in their case study revealed that Angle's writing considerably improved in a year. From a non-writer Angel started to present the following characteristics:

- a) use of short paragraphs, but an engaging writer;
- b) coherent and syntactically correct sentences;
- c) A struggle with comparisons, but correct use of adjectives, as for instance, in the sentence *I am tall from my dad*;
- d) Use of a thesis statement signaling points he would be making and elaborating on;
- e) Use of temporal connectives such as *first*, *second* and *lastly*;
- f) Proper use of causal conditions connectives (like *because*);
- g) Consistently using modals of possibility, phrasal verbs and future tense.

For Dunn and Finley (2010) if students who struggle with writing could note their initial ideas in a format other than words, they could have the metacognitive skills to know how to manage the writing process: describing story, characters, setting, main events and drawing a cohesive conclusion. However, there are counter effects to which teachers must be attentive to.

### 5.3 – Challenges of using visuals in writing

Lee, Bopry, and Hedberg, (2006) show that the use of visuals may have its disadvantages, namely the fact that there is the danger of instruction becoming

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

redundant and interfering with additional learning if the student already has extensive knowledge of the topic being discussed. In this case, they recommend that teachers “encourage students with high prior knowledge to use organizers with the constructing function, while students with low prior knowledge should be introduced to organizers with constraining and complementary functions to support their learning” (Lee, Bopry, and Hedberg, 2006, p. 135).

Another pointed disadvantage to the integration of visuals in the writing process is that multiple representations can distract the students from their focus of attention when there is too much redundant or extraneous information (Lee, Bopry, and Hedberg, 2006). In this case educators need to guide and assist the students in order to help them maintain the focus.

They also state that students have difficulties translating between representations. Therefore, Students will need explanations and explicit metacognitive instruction in order to be able to concentrate on generating, commenting, and revising the content using visuals, organizers in particular.

This paper does not claim that ELLs with special needs do not have a disability, however, it does argue for a teaching approach that could explore the benefits of incorporating visuals in the writing instruction of these students as they can be more visual than verbal learners. It seems that a pedagogy that insists on a practice that focuses on students’ weaknesses rather than on their strengths is unproductive and ineffective because students continue to fail or to go through great ordeals in writing. All students should be perceived as capable learners and instruction should accommodate to their needs, and be based on their capacities and strengths (Graham and Harris, 2009). In order to achieve this, educators need to alter

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

the reinforcement procedures for those learners who have not achieved with conventional learning programs or methods (Sinatra, 1986). Educators need to alter their practices in order to accommodate those students that struggle with writing and have not achieved in traditional approaches.

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

### VI – Suggestions and Conclusion

#### 6.1 – Suggestions

Liu, Barrera, and Turlow (2009) state that Federal education legislation emphasizes effective and accountable education for all students, including English language learners with disabilities; however, improvement in the standards-based academic achievement of ELLs with disabilities has not kept pace with that of their peers. Research on instructional practices validated for ELLs with disabilities is scarce and often is inferred from practices used with general populations of learners.

Krashen (2008) affirms that we understand language in only one way: when we understand messages. According to him, comprehensible input occurs when people give messages that others understand, that is, it is the role of the teacher to provide comprehensible input that fits the students' needs, instead of pre-determining an approach and expect students to fit in.

However, providing input only is not sufficient, teachers have to make input comprehensible and certify that students understand it. Kumaravadivelu (2003) makes an interesting distinction between input and intake (an idea expressed in Corder, 1967) that teachers must be conscious about:

Input refers to oral and written data of the target language to which learners are exposed through various sources, and recognized by them as useful and useable for language learning purposes. Intake, on the other hand, is “what goes in and not what is available to go in”. To a large extent, what actually goes in is determined by how learners perceive the usefulness of classroom events through which they are exposed to input; (pp. 77-78).

Fostering intake has to be coupled with strategies that help students to be able to access their background information and to put information on paper at any

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

stage of the writing process. The researches I have reviewed focus mainly on the importance of the use of visuals on the pre-writing/drafting stage as a complementary tool to help students generate; however, the visuals can also be used in all the other phases of the writing process. According to Graham and Harris (2006), there is a variety of ways skilled writer go about the composition process, but no matter which strategy they choose, planning has a central role in writing success. They recommend that poor writers should create a written plan as it provides an external memory, where ideas can be stored without the risk of losing them and are readily available for inspection, reflection, and reconceptualization. This idea is supported by Andrzejczak, Trainin, and Poldberg (2005) who performed detailed case studies with elementary students in California in a school with 68% free/reduced lunch, 38% Hispanic, 55% Caucasian, and 7% others. Using a Picturing-Writing Process, students used graphic organizers in the pre-writing stage to brainstorm ideas, and they concluded that the visuals enhanced the writing process as they provided motivational entry point, improved thought and writing by generating strong descriptions and developing concrete vocabulary. Although neither of these studies state that they were specifically designed to ELLs, Special Needs, or ELLs with Special Needs, they were developed with poor writers who had difficulties generating ideas, planning, and generating strong descriptions, which are typical areas of struggle to ELLs with special needs.

Students may put much more information on their visuals than in their writing, therefore, the visuals can serve as a guide not only to outline the ideas in the pre-writing and drafting stages, but also in revision, writing, and editing stages. Furthermore, they can use the visual as a checklist to confirm that they have written all the aspects they portrayed in the visual. Visuals could also function as a strategy to

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

show students that writing is not only about handwriting, grammar, and mechanics in general, but also about content and passing a message to an audience. For Delpit (1988) only direct instruction is not enough. For her, students need to know that they are actually writing for a real purpose and audience. For a population who typically struggle with the tasks of writing to an audience, making explicit directions, valuing the product and foreseeing a purpose can be the key to help them create a sense of audience and ownership.

For Vaughn and Bos (2012), the most important thing to remember about writing instruction to students with special needs is that they require adequate time to write and “to receive scaffold instruction with feedback from the teacher, however, they also require explicit and systematic instruction in the critical elements and skills necessary for effective writing” (pp. 288-289). Flower and Hayes (1981) also share this idea as for them writing should be recursive and taught through individual connections and not by grammar or assigned timed writing tasks.

Giving students time to process the new information and ideas is also important as students need that time to run the input through their own filters of meaning. For Tomlison (2001), “As they [students] try to analyze, apply, question, or solve a problem using material, they have to make sense of it before it becomes theirs” (p. 79). This is an essential component of instruction without which students either lose or confuse their ideas (idem).

Pritchard and Honeycutt (2007) suggest that the writing instruction of special needs learners require more intense and more explicit instruction than their peers without disabilities. Graham and Harris (2005) performed a study with first and second graders, each group receiving 7 and 12 hours, respectively, of explicit instruction in handwriting, spelling, and writing sentences. They concluded that the

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

students improved their spelling in the classroom and also on standardized tests and they also improved sentence writing skills.

Pritchard and Honeycutt (2007) suggest the following guidelines using the process approach to writing instruction of poor writers:

- Address the emotional issues surrounding writing;
- Develop students' understanding of the writing process
- Model and teach self-regulation strategies
- Train and monitor peer partners and peer response groups
- Develop a composing vocabulary

A suggestion Graham and Harris (2005) make to ease processing demands of incorporating new procedures into a cognitive system is to explicitly demonstrate how to apply these strategies and then scaffold instruction. According to them, this will help students move from this scaffold instruction to a stage where they can apply the strategies on their own efficiently.

To Santamaria, Fletcher and Bos (2002), English Language Learners with special needs need scaffolding. Scaffolding is defined as “temporary supports, provided by more capable people, that permit learners to perform a complex process before they are able to do so unassisted” (Peregoy and Boyle, 2013, p. 114). Scaffold can be provided during the peer response and revision stages in the process writing approach, but also by the teachers and the visuals as these are available at any point of the writing process to assist them. During the peer response stage students can use their visuals to make clarification or edition of their content and structure. The authors suggest story maps as one of the scaffold ELLs with special needs students can receive to improve their performance. Work Educational tools that support student learning are scaffold. In this way “Scaffolds shift from outwardly visible or external

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

to abstract or internal. In other words, scaffolds relate to supports that are originally provided externally by teachers or more proficient peers are replaced by internalized strategies that are used independently by the students” (p. 135).

Students must have access to high-quality instruction designed to help them meet high expectations. Teachers should employ strategies known to be effective with English learners, such as drawing on their prior knowledge; providing opportunities to review previously learned concepts and teaching them to employ those concepts; organizing themes or strands that connect the curriculum across subject areas; and providing individual guidance, assistance, and support to fill gaps in background knowledge (Ortiz 2001). Leopold (2012) suggest mind-mapping as a wonderful ways for visual learners ELLs to brainstorm ideas and to map cause-effect sequences. According to her, graphic organizers are also useful tasks to help diverse students who are visual learners to categorize, classify, and organize their ideas.

I believe that teachers should understand that guiding students through a process is not ultimately to assess and evaluate, but rather to provide them the tools and steps they will need to produce a good written text, but schools do require assessment and evaluation of students’ work. In a process approach to writing instruction formative assessments can be the best procedure to monitor students’ progress, weaknesses and strengths in the different stages of the process, including the product.

Formative assessment throughout the different stages is mandatory in order to identify possible problems and to create opportunities to give feedback and provide explicit instruction on language, content and structure. Informal assessment instruments such as portfolios and holistic scoring. Peregoy and Boyle (2013) refer to portfolios as an assessment tool that keeps selected pieces of students’ writing in a



## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

special folder in order to assess students' growth, allows students to evaluate their own writing, and gives feedback on teacher practices. Holistic scoring are useful assessment tools to readily compare papers in terms of quality. They evaluate the piece of writing on the same topic as a whole rather than evaluation of separate aspects of writing such as spelling, punctuation, grammar or mechanics (Peregoy and Boyle, 2013). Holistic scoring enables teachers to look not only for expected indicators, but also "identify and respond to unique features of the product performance" Hammerman, 2009, p. 20).

### 6.2 – Conclusion

As Baca and Cervantes (1991) point out, "Operationalizing bilingual special education requires the creation of an instructional social system that involves active teaching of cognitive skills and includes the development of language skills while focusing on the acquisition of English" (para. 7). The needs of L2 students in writing often do not match the school ideology (Leki, Cumming and Silva, 2008).

Traditionally, learning disabled youngsters have been categorized based upon a written language deficit model (Olson, 1992). Very often students' academic failure have much more to do with the curriculum, methods, approaches, and classroom settings than with any disability in the child (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short, 2013).

Liasidou (2013) calls for the necessity top view teaching as a political act rooted in social and cultural dynamics interacting with students and constructing their identities. Teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students implies respect and value towards students' culture and L1. If teachers try to make students fit into their approaches instead of developing approaches that fit the students, they will not only

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

be imposing their own values and learning styles, but also increasing the gap between teachers input and student intake, which may result in unproductive and ineffective teaching). Educators may not have the necessary training to address the interaction between students' language-learning and disability-related characteristics. Furthermore, students may have different learning styles that must be respected and addressed by the teacher because cognitive/learning styles are not good or bad per se, but rather bipolar dimensions with strengths and weaknesses, and "sometimes mixed characteristics on sub-dimensions along multiple style continua" (Ortega, 2009, p. 205).

Process means sense-making or, just as it sounds, opportunity for learners to process the content or ideas and skills to which they have been introduced (Tomlison, 2001). Therefore, working with a flexible, non-linear process approach to writing can be helpful to guide students in the several steps that writing incorporates. However, in case of visual learners, it would be more productive to incorporate visuals not only on the drafting stage, but also on writing and revision stages, or even publishing stages as a support to generating and organizing idea, developing text structure, revising and editing and creating a sense of audience.

Using visuals allied to explicit instruction on each phase can be beneficial to ELLs with Special Needs. The visuals can be used to confirm that what's on the visual is actually written, to add details, to develop a sense of an audience, and foster a deeper understanding of the process because students will be using devices that allow them to use their own filters of meaning, therefore, it may be easier for them to take property of their writing. As Tomlison (2001) shows, as students try to analyze, apply, question or solve a problem they have to make sense of it before they could claim ownership upon it. When teachers do so they are promoting learning that can

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

last with the students. This is something teachers must take into consideration as teaching does not automatically lead to learning and teachers and students may have different perspectives on what constitutes a learning opportunity (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Our job as teachers is not to teach for the sake of teaching or to promote “learning to learn”, but rather to foster “learning to liberate” (Kumaravadivelu, 2003) which, in turn, will produce autonomous students of all cognitive styles.

This study has its limitations as no empirical research was done to test if the inclusion of visuals in all stages of the process writing approach is effective to improve cognitive and performance skills of ELLs with special needs in writing. However, I suggest the use a survey (appendix A) and an interview guide (Appendix B) that can be helpful in assisting researchers who would be willing to develop future research and experiment in this topic.

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## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

**Appendix A: Survey**

My name is Lindinalva Lima, I am a graduate student of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) at Bridgewater State University (BSU). I am currently writing my thesis (Adapting the Process Writing Approach to ELLs with special needs) as part of the course requirement and this survey is part of the methodology. The study is anonymous and your participation is voluntary. I appreciate your help.

**SECTION A: GENERAL INFORMATION**

1. Gender: Male / Female ☐
2. Years of experience as a teacher.....years
3. I have had experience working with students with disabilities for .....years
4. Have you received any training on special needs education? No ☐ ☐ Yes  
(If YES, please continue to items a,b,c)
- a. What kind of training have you received?
- ☐ ☐ In- service training during summer
- ☐ ☐ School-based training
- ☐ ☐ Teacher training university degree
- ☐ ☐ Other; Please specify): .....
5. What kind of impairment do you work with? (You may select more than one statement)
- ☐ ☐ Visual impairment
- ☐ ☐ Hearing impairment
- ☐ ☐ Physical disability
- ☐ ☐ Learning disability
- ☐ ☐ Other. (Please specify):.....

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

**SECTION B: OPINION**

**This section** contains 14 statements conceived to collect your opinion about the Process Writing Approach and the use of visuals in writing. Please circle one that best represents your opinion in a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

**6 - I use the Process Writing Approach in my classes.**

1.Strongly disagree    2.Disagree    3.Agree    4.Strongly agree

**7 – The Process Writing Approach is an effective instruction practice for ELLs.**

1.Strongly disagree    2.Disagree    3.Agree    4.Strongly agree

**8 – The Process Writing Approach is an effective instruction practice for ELLs with special needs.**

1.Strongly disagree    2.Disagree    3.Agree    4.Strongly agree

**9 – I believe visuals can improve ELLs with special needs' writing skills.**

1.Strongly disagree    2.Disagree    3.Agree    4.Strongly agree

**10 – I use visuals in all my classes.**

1.Strongly disagree    2.Disagree    3.Agree    4.Strongly agree

**11 – I use visuals in the pre-writing stage of the writing process.**

1.Strongly disagree    2.Disagree    3.Agree    4.Strongly agree

**12 – I use visuals throughout the whole writing process.**

1.Strongly disagree    2.Disagree    3.Agree    4.Strongly agree

**13 – I am willing to make needed instructional adaptations for my ELL students with special needs.**

1.Strongly disagree    2.Disagree    3.Agree    4.Strongly agree

**14 - More teacher training on special education is required in order to achieve success in inclusive classrooms.**

1.Strongly disagree    2.Disagree    3.Agree    4.Strongly agree

## ADAPTING PROCESS WRITING TO SPECIAL NEEDS ELLS

### Appendix B: Interview guide

School: ..... Teacher: ..... Date: .....  
 ...../...../..... Grade: ..... Class topic: .....

#### Section A: The Process Writing Approach

- 1 – What are the main difficulties ELLs with Special needs face in writing?
- 2 – Can Process Writing Approach be beneficial to these students? Why?
- 3 – Do you apply all the steps of the Process Writing Approach?
- 4 – Do you follow the order of the steps?
- 5 – Which step do you think is more difficult to ELLs with special needs?

#### Section B: Using visual in writing:

- 6 – Do you use visuals in your classroom? Why?
- 7 – How often do you use visuals?
- 8 – What kind of visuals do you use? Which you think is more effective to ELLs with special needs?
- 9 – Can visuals be integrated in the Process Writing Approach? If so, how?
- 10 - Do you believe that it is possible to integrate visuals in all the Process Writing Approach steps (not only on the drafting phase)?
- 11 – How often do the students use visuals in their writing?
- 12 – Would you say that your ELL with Special needs students are more visual learners, or not? Why?

#### Section C: Assessment and recommendations:

- 13 – How do you assess students' writing?
- 14 – What procedures / strategies would you recommend to other ELL with special needs teachers?